

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASS AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
AMEMBASSY JERUSALEM
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USLO RIYADH
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 1238

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TAGS: PERP, SY, LE, MOPS
SUBJ: SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON

REF: A) DAMASCUS 1114, B) BEIRUT 0982

1. SUMMARY. REFTEL A IS THOUGHTFUL ANALYSIS OF AMBIGUITIES OF SYRIAN POSITION IN LEBANON TODAY WHICH SUBSTANTIALLY TRACKS WITH THE SITUATION AS SEEN FROM BEIRUT. OUR INFORMATION HOWEVER SUGGESTS THAT, WHEREAS THEIR POLITICAL INTENTIONS IN LEBANON REMAIN SOMEWHAT AMBIGUOUS, THE SYRIANS DO SEEM TO BE DEVELOPING A NEW MILITARY STRATEGY SUITABLE TO THE POST-FAYYADIYAH SITUATION. SYRIAN RETALIATION AGAINST LEBANESE INDIVIDUALS SUSPECTED
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IN THE FAYYADIYAH INCIDENTS WILL PROBABLY BE A DIRECT FUNCTION OF EFFECTIVENESS OR INEFFECTIVENESS OF JOINT MILITARY TRIBUNAL. ISRAELI SPECTRE LOOMS HERE, AS IT DOES IN DAMASCUS. END SUMMARY.

2. THE SYRIAN POLITICAL STRATEGY. AS VIEWED FROM BEIRUT, SYRIAN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON, SINCE THE END OF THE FIGHTING IN NOVEMBER 1976, HAS HAD TWO PRINCIPAL FACETS: (1)

CLOSE ALLIANCE WITH THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT; (2) POLITICAL PARTY MANIPULATION. WE REMAIN CONVINCED THAT BASIC SYRIAN APPROACH IS TO PROVIDE A SECURITY UMBRELLA BENEATH WHICH SARKIS GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE ABLE TO RECONSTITUTE THE LEBANESE STATE, INCLUDING A LEBANESE NATIONAL ARMY. SYRIANS, TO BE SURE, WANT TO SEE THEIR OWN FRIENDS IN BEIRUT FEATURED PROMINENTLY IN THE GOVERNMENT APPARATUS, AND SARKIS IS APPARENTLY WILLING TO ACCOMMODATE THEM. IN CURRENT MANEUVERING TOWARDS A NEW "POLITICAL" CABINET, ALL THE RUMORS WE HEAR ASSUME THAT SYRIAN FRIENDS SUCH AS ASSEM QANSU, KEMAL SHATILA, AND TALAL MERHABI WILL BE INCLUDED AND THAT POLITICAL FIGURES DISTINCTLY ON THE OUTS WITH THE SYRIANS, SUCH AS SAEB SALAAM, WILL NOT. THIS IS A LONG WAY FROM A PUPPET GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, MUCH AS SYRIANS MIGHT LIKE ONE.

3. ON THE POLITICAL PARTY LEVEL, THE SYRIANS HAVE OF COURSE BEEN LENDING A HELPING HAND TO THEIR FRIENDS, SUCH AS THE PRO-SYRIAN WING OF THE LEBANESE BAATH PARTY AND THE "UNION OF WORKING PEOPLE'S FORCES." THE SYRIANS HAVE ALSO TRIED TO ESTABLISH (OR MAINTAIN) SPECIAL RELATIONS WITH VARIOUS ESTABLISHED LEBANESE POLITICIANS, INCLUDING, OF COURSE, SULEIMAN FRANGIEH, BUT ALSO WALID JUMBLATT, KARIM PAKRADOUNI AND PERHAPS MORE RECENTLY AMINE GEMAYEL. THIS IS A TWO-WAY GAME, HOWEVER, AND IT IS AT LEAST AS EASY FOR THE LEBANESE TO USE THEIR VARIOUS SYRIAN CONNECTIONS FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSES AS IT IS FOR THE SYRIANS TO USE THEM TO IMPOSE A SYRIAN POLITICAL WILL IN LEBANON. WE HAVE, FOR EXAMPLE, BEEN TOLD THAT AMINE

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GEMAYEL'S RECENT DEALINGS WITH ASSEM QANSU AND WITH SYRIAN MILITARY COMMANDERS IN LEBANON WERE A DELIBERATE PHALANGIST PLOY TO NEUTRALIZE SYRIAN SUSPICION OF THE PHALANGIST LINK WITH THE ISRAELIS.

4. ON THE SYRIAN SIDE, AS SEEN FROM HERE THERE ARE AT LEAST THREE DISTINCT TRENDS: 1) THE ASSAD GOVERNMENT, WHICH PURSUES AN ESSENTIALLY "BENIGN" STRATEGY, BOTH POLITICAL AND MILITARY IN LEBANON; 2) CERTAIN MILITARY LEADERS, WHO, IN VERY UNDERSTANDABLE HUMAN TERMS, WANT TO RETALIATE IN MILITARY FASHION AGAINST MARONITE PROVOCATIONS AGAINST SYRIAN TROOPS; 3) THE BAATH PARTY IDEOLOGUES, WHO DREAM OF LEBANON AS A FIRST STEP IN THE CREATION OF A P,-ARABIC UNION.

5. EVIDENCE ON THE GROUND SO FAR POINTS TO ASSAD'S CONTROL OF THE SITUATION. IN SPITE OF THE KILLING OF SOME 150 SYRIAN SOLDIERS DURING THE FAYYADIYAH INCIDENTS (MANY MORE THAN ON THE LEBANESE SIDE), THE SYRIANS HAVE NOT, ASIDE FROM SHELLING ASHRAFIYAH AND AYN AR-RUMANNAH WITH ROCKETS AND ARTILLERY, RETALIATED IN THE EASY MILITARY WAY, WITH MASSIVE FIREPOWER ON POPULATED AREAS. THE SYRIANS DID ACCEPT CREATION OF A JOINT LEBANESE-SYRIAN MILITARY TRIBUNAL WHICH EVEN THE LEBANESE (WITH

THE EXCEPTION OF PEOPLE LIKE BACHIR GEMAYEL) DEFEND AS LEGAL
AND PROPER UNDER THE LEBANESE CONSTITUTION, ALTHOUGH WE DOUBT
THAT ASSAD BELIEVES THIS TRIBUNAL WILL BE EFFECTIVE.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BEIRUT 1238

6. SYRIAN MILITARY STRATEGY. IF BASIC SYRIAN POLITICAL
INTENTIONS IN LEBANON ARE IN SOME DOUBT, WE BELIEVE THE
EVIDENCE POINTS TO A COHERENT MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE
PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES. REFTEL B REPORTS WHAT KARIM PAKRADOUNI,
A LEADING SYRIAN APOLOGIST, IS SAYING ABOUT THE NEW POSTXFAYYA-
DIYAH-SYRIAN MILITARY STRATEGY IN LEBANON. EVIDENCE ON THE
GROUND SUPPORTS PAKRADOUNI'S HYPOTHESIS (AND PARA 6 REFTEL A) THAT
THE SYRIANS HAVE REDEPLOYED IN SUCH A WAY AS TO MINIMIZE THE
VULNERABILITY OF THEIR OWN TROOPS WHILE AT THE SAME TIME
PUTTING THEMSELVES IN A BETTER POSITION TO REACT SWIFTLY AND
EFFECTIVELY IN THE EVENT OF FUTURE INCIDENTS. THERE IS ALSO A
PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENT: THE SYRIANS, FOR EXAMPLE, NOW HAVE A
STRONG POSITION ABOVE THE TUNNEL AT THE DOG RIVER ON THE ROAD
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BETWEEN BEIRUT AND JOUNIEH. IT IS EVIDENT TO EVEN THE MOST RADICAL OF MARONITE MILITIAMEN, THAT THE SYRIANS COULD AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE CUT OFF EAST BEIRUT FROM JOUNIEH AND THE MARONITE HEARTLAND. A GREAT MANY SYRIAN ROADBLOCKS WHICH HAVE STOOD FOR MONTHS HAVE DISAPPEARED, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, SYRIANS HAVE SUBSTANTIALLY STRENGTHENED KEY POSITIONS, SUCH AS AT RIZK TOWER, WHERE BACHIR GEMAYEL (WHO LIVES IN ITS SHADOW) POINTED OUT TO THE AMBASSADOR RECENTLY THE NEW LARGE CALIBER DIRECT FIRE WEAPONS NOW ON ITS ROOF, WITH CLEAR, UNIMPEDED FIELDS OF FIRE OVER ALL ASHRAFIYAH.

7. WE WILL NOT BE SURPRISED TO SEE THE SYRIANS PURSUING RETALIATION ON AN EYE-FOR-AN-EYE BASIS, WITHOUT DEFERENCE TO LEGAL NICETIES. THIS IS IN FACT THE POLICY THEY HAVE PURSUED ALL ALONG IN LEBANON - EQUALLY AGAINST PALESTINIAN-LEFTISTS (AS AT MAKASSAD HOSPITAL IN MAY 1977) AND AGAINST MARONITES (AS AT BILLA IN JUL 1977). IT APPEARS TO US THAT THE SYRIANS UNDERSTAND THAT SUCH A POLICY NEED NOT BE INSTANTANEOUS, AND HAVE THE POLITICAL ASTUTENESS TO AT THE SAME TIME PERMIT ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT MILITARY TRIBUNAL PROCEDURE WHICH WILL GIVE THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR GOOD FAITH AND EFFECTIVENESS WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF LEBANESE "LEGAL TRADITIONS." IF THE THREAT OF SYRIAN RETALIATION IN FACT FRIGHTENS THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES INTO MAKING THEIR "LEGAL TRADITIONS" REALLY WORK, SO MUCH THE BETTER.

8. THE ISRAELI SPECTER. ASSAD'S FEARS OF LARGE-SCALE ISRAELI INTERVENTION IN LEBANON WOULD SEEM TO BE JUSTIFIED BY THE REPORTED ISRAELI ENCOURAGEMENT OF CHRISTIAN MILITIA HARDLINERS, IN PARTICULAR BACHIR GEMAYEL, TO TAKE A MORE AGGRESSIVE STAND AGAINST THE SYRIANS. IN SOUTH LEBANON, IT MAY NOT BE COINCIDENTAL THAT THE ISRAELI-SUPPLIED CHRISTIAN FORCES UNDER MAJOR HADDAD SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED THEIR MILITARY PRESSURE

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ON PALESTINIANS AROUND MARJAYOUN DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF THE AFFAIR, WHILE THE PALESTINIANS WERE DELIBERATELY LAYING LOW BOTH IN THE SOUTH AND IN BEIRUT. THE ISRAELI STRATEGY IS NOT CLEAR, BUT THEIR TACTICS SEEM TO BE TO ENCOURAGE THE CHRISTIANS TO KEEP THE POT BOILING.

9. REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS. EMBASSY DAMASCUS NOTES THAT RENEWED LARGE-SCALE FIGHTING IN LEBANON COULD DASH HOPES RAISED BY THE SADAT INITIATIVES. WE SHARE THE SAME FEELING, AND RECALL THAT THE 1975-76 TROUBLES IN LEBANON WERE ALLEGED TO HAVE POISONED THE ATMOSPHERE FOR CONTINUING THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

AFTER SINAI II. IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE HOW SYRIA, IF TRULY IN A
"QUAGMIRE" IN LEBANON, COULD PLAY A MODERATE BUT STRONG ROLE
IN THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. WHILE THE SITUATION
IS AMBIGUOUS, AND THE SYRIANS ARE CERTAINLY NOT OUT OF THE
WOODS IN LEBANON, WE FEEL THEY ARE NOT YET IN A QUAGMIRE, AND
JUST MIGHT SUCCEED IN THEIR ENTERPRISE IN LEBANON.
PARKER

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